

Pain and Cruelty

PHYSICAL PAIN is a common experience. Each of us knows first hand that it is evil. It is well known that there is more to pain than the mere sensation. We do distinguish the nerve endings where stimulation, mechanical, electrical or chemical, produces the sensation of pain. We also know the tracts in the spinal cord where pain sensations run. But there is a central component that gives pain its intolerable quality. It is not known for sure whether this is a neural activity of the cerebrum or of the basal ganglia. Certainly operative interference with the frontal lobes (leucotomy) can lessen or remove the pain quality from normally painful sensations.

Inference of pain in other persons subject to such injuries as give pain to oneself is universal. Extension of this inference to domestic and wild mammals is nearly universal, and extension to all vertebrates, warm- and cold-blooded, is common. A few people are convinced that all life is sensitive and can suffer pain. One is occasionally admonished: "Never burn flowers." The devout Hindu, cultivating the saintly life, wears a mask over nose and mouth so as to avoid inhaling insects and so injuring or killing them.

The intolerable nature of pain induces a psychological reaction, not only in the person suffering the pain, but in persons only observing (inferring) pain suffered by other persons. The psychological reaction is unpleasant in all degrees according to the observer's sentimental proximity to the object in which the pain is inferred. There is therefore a hierarchy: Self > wife and children > other relatives > persons of same co-terie > persons of same race, nation, color, etc. >

EDITOR'S NOTE: The author of this essay was for many years professor and head of the Department of Radiology at Stanford University School of Medicine, posts from which he is now retired. An original and imaginative thinker, he is one of the West's most distinguished radiologists, an excellent clinician and a teacher of wide renown. For the more than 20 years that he served on the Editorial Board of CALIFORNIA MEDICINE, his extraordinary skill and interest in clear, concise expression contributed richly to this journal's stature.

His background, his ability and the quality of the present essay make this latest contribution a most welcome one.

one's own dog, horse, cat, cow, etc. > other domestic mammals > wild mammals > other vertebrates > invertebrates > plants with capability of movement > other plants > non-living objects.

Fictional pain, portrayed in play or story, whether presented as physical pain or psychological distress, produces a fictional psychological reaction in the observer. Even if accompanied by the normal psychosomatic emergencies, namely tears and convulsions (sobbing), it is ordinarily accepted as pleasurable.

Sympathy is the general term for the psychological reaction in a person who observes (infers) real pain in another person or being (*vide supra*). Sympathy depends on an internal image of what is externally observed. The image is amended and polished by the personality of the observer. The image and the sympathy induced are quite independent of the truth or falsity of the inference about the physical pain suffered by another.

Courage is the refusal to let pain deter or deviate one from one's purpose or preferred way of life. Courage also lessens the psychosomatic concomitants of pain in the sufferer, and so reduces the quantity of sympathy that others feel obligated to. The observers are grateful for this. Courage extends into the future when pain is only threatened. This is essential, but what we are talking about here is pain present, not pain anticipated.

Admiration for courage is universal, and no wonder! The courageous fighter will win the fight, and enough courageous warriors will win the war *for us!* Those who bear their pain courageously spare our sympathy by that much. We find more pleasure in admiration than in sympathy (well, most of us do).

Self respect is enhanced in the courageous sufferer by the admiration of those observing his pain and his courage. The courageous person therefore reaps two rewards—(1) personal, in the diminution of the unpleasant psychosomatic emergencies produced by the pain, and (2) social, in the admiration of his friends and the approbation of Society.

Cruelty

Cruelty is something that accompanies the infliction of pain. It is an attribute of the instrument, whether person or tool. The pain itself may be called cruel, but that is a poetical extension of the meaning. It is quite usual to call the surgeon's

knife cruel, even though the surgeon is not called cruel. For most people, the surgeon's benign purpose and his presumed sympathy offset the cruelty implicit in his operation.

Antagonism to the cruel person is the normal psychological effect of the sympathy induced in the beholder. Failure to reveal such antagonism in proper circumstances is described as hardness of heart. At times the hardhearted observer is accounted cruel, a sort of guilt by association.

Enjoyable emotional reaction to cruelty, or just to pain, has already been mentioned in the field of fiction. But the contemplation of real pain can serve as a foil to increase the observer's own sense of well-being. The increase of this emotion to the degree called exultation should be looked on as pathological, or at any rate sinful. Sexual perversions in which sexual excitement and satisfaction are found only in the suffering of pain (masochism) or the infliction of pain (sadism) are well known in psychopathology.

Aggression. The infliction of pain in order to enjoy the emotional reaction is not limited to overt pathological states. It is usual in aggressive acts of all sorts. Peck order is worked out in any society by the infliction of pain, physical or psychological. This must be called graduated cruelty. It has become socially acceptable in many cultures and subcultures. Hazing is an example.

Punishment is the infliction of pain for the purpose of influencing action (usually social interaction). Lip service is always rendered to the ideal, that cruelty does not enter, or only to the degree necessary. Father, whipping his son, says, "This hurts me more than it does you." The psychological effects of the cruelty are usually not completely avoidable, however. We always suspect that the executioner has a black heart.

Vengeance is punishment taken into one's own hands. The punishment is inflicted in order to enjoy its psychological effect. Cruelty is therefore an essential part of vengeance and is universally seen to be immoral except in those coteries or cultures in which the relatives of an injured person are required to avenge the injury (feuding). In our Western culture, vengeance is generally believed to be injurious to the personality (sinful) as well as being against public policy. "Vengeance is mine," saith the Lord.¹ Crime should be punished by the State after proper trial and judgment.

Careless infliction of pain may be from mere

hardness of heart or due to preoccupation. Pain inflicted incidental to other purposes is no doubt just as hard to bear as if inflicted intentionally. But the psychological repercussions are quite different. Our judgment about the morality or sinfulness of pain incidentally inflicted depends on the purpose and the circumstances.

Selfish pursuit of one's own purposes regardless of the consequences is in the same category. The defense is sometimes presented that the person, wrapped up in his own project, is no more careless of other persons' comfort than of his own. This is usually seen to be a pretty lame excuse.

Lack of sympathy or "emotional blindness" is sometimes the reason for failing to avoid inflicting pain on other persons. Hardness of heart is no more lovable, however, just because it is claimed to be innate, instead of being newly developed for the selfish occasion.

Physical obtuseness is often confused with hardness of heart. One does occasionally find persons whose pain threshold is high, both physically and psychologically. The image of another person's pain reflected in themselves is dim. They see the other person's pain as if "through a glass, darkly."² Proper social training could, no doubt, bring such a person to apply his "personal equation" as a correction to every observation and thus standardize it to the common social norm. Applied generally, this ideal has been called "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind."³

Intellectual lack of conviction of the reality of pain produced in another person is usually accounted not logical, but simply hardness of heart. Concerning pain in lower animals, however, it may be logically defensible. (See below under hunting and fishing, vivisection, etc.)

Egotism can so overwhelm all other feelings that the emotional response to the observation of pain in others remains subliminal. This is especially likely when the egotist has inflicted the pain and the submergence of sympathy is a technique for protecting his ego from blame. It is easier to deny the pain than to excuse the action.

Cool choice of actions that incidentally produce pain or that are actually designed to produce pain is seen where the purpose is conceived to be imperative. It is notorious in the use of torture to wring confession from accused persons. In the past it led to the choice of flagrantly painful punishment to deter others from criminal or from adverse

political action. Many religious sects have used torture to expiate sin and to gain ultimate bliss for the tortured person. One can only guess what the emotional repercussions were on the men who worked the rack in the Spanish Inquisition or on the Englishmen who ordered St. Joan tortured and burned. The coolest anecdote is the one about Ivan the Terrible, who was interested in torture. In the Tower of London he was shown the wheel, with regret expressed that no suitable criminal was at hand to be broken on it. The story is that Ivan said, "Use one of my men. I wish to see the demonstration."

Hunting, fishing and trapping have the purpose of obtaining the bodies of wild animals for food or clothing. They necessarily injure the animals and by common inference cause them pain. Originally the infliction of pain was a matter of indifference, but for a long time now has excited sympathy in observers, and in many of the hunters.

It is a common practice to "put the animal out of its misery," that is, to kill the wounded animal, thus terminating the presumed pain and the hunter's sympathetic disquiet at the same time. Some states outlaw traps that maim but do not kill. Most fishermen stun the fish, as soon as caught, by a blow on the head, feeling that a fish flapping about out of water is "suffering." Crabs and lobsters are caught without maiming them and are kept alive to preserve their food value. Controversy rages about the best way to kill with the least pain. The usual practice of throwing crabs into boiling water produces violent movements of their appendages, apprehended as evidence of severe pain. To put the crab in cool water and warm it gradually to boiling produces no such violent movement and is accounted "humane." No physiological experiments purporting to prove the absence of pain have come to my attention. Most states have laws regulating the way large animals are to be killed in abattoirs. A blow on the head or the severance of the spinal cord at the foramen magnum is considered "humane," that is, producing a minimum of pain.

All these things show the force of man's emotional reaction to observation of (presumed) pain in animals or the knowledge of it. The infliction of an injury is considered cruel and engenders a feeling of guilt in many persons. The intensity of feeling is so great in some persons that guilt is excited by eating flesh and even by wearing furs, because the animal has had to suffer pain. To pro-

tect their souls, such persons become vegetarians. Many of them know that their motive is sentimental and illogical. It would be cruel to tell such a person how silkworm chrysalides are boiled before winding off the silk, in order to see if he would logically eschew silk as well as fur.

Much has been written about the morality of hunting and fishing. If these activities are seen to hurt the feelings of people in general to a sufficient degree, one can presumably make an objective judgment of immorality. One suspects that the complaint is more usually based on the conviction that hunting and trapping are sinful—that "obviously" the hunter's personality is changed, that is, his heart is hardened, by the necessary repeated denial of the sympathy that would normally be excited by his cruel acts. This is not obvious to everyone. There are other influences effective to diminish the outward show of softer sentiment in hunters and trappers. They necessarily adapt to hardship in the chase, even to severe hardship in walking a long trapline in a cold winter. People who consider themselves physically and mentally (emotionally) "tough" are quite generally intolerant of the weaknesses that they observe in those persons whom they consider "soft." This is a species of psychological aggression and quite naturally begets the only reaction readily available, namely to call the "tough" ones cruel and sinful.

Not a few people say that the cruelty is an essential part of the hunter's motivation. This, I believe, is slander, even though there can be little doubt that the successful hunter enjoys a feeling of power, engendered at least in part by the pain and death inflicted, and not entirely by the sense of something difficult accomplished.

Contests

All contests, in which one person wins and another loses, depend on the infliction of pain (at least the emotional pain of defeat) for their validity. In *prize fighting* and *professional wrestling* we can be sure that the reward to the spectator lies in vicarious assault. To some degree the spectator identifies himself with one of the adversaries and mirrors in himself the exultation of inflicting pain upon the other. This probably is true also of all "body-contact" sports—football and hockey at any rate. In other sports, too, the spectator "identifies" with the victor. Any cruel feelings aroused are the psychological concomitants of aggression,

without necessarily involving physical injury and pain.

Enough has already been said about attribution of human feelings to lower animals to make it clear that similar arguments apply to dogfighting and cockfighting, bullfighting and other such sports.

Spanish *bullfighting* deserves closer analysis. No doubt the spectators do identify themselves with the *toreros*. But it is not certain that the infliction of pain is the source of the *afficionado's* addiction. We are told that what the Spaniard admires is courage. (As who does not?) What he transfers to himself is the matador's skill and grace and above all his courage. The bull is not merely there to suffer. The bull is an essential actor in this parade of courage. The Spanish believe that nothing can exceed the nobility of a brave bull. "The bravery of a truly brave bull is something unearthly and unbelievable."⁴

Conclusion

Cruelty is not an attribute of pain, but of the thing or person that produced the pain, if it is perceived as cruel. Thus cruelty requires a witness. The pain can stand alone and so can the infliction of it. There is of necessity a witness there—the sufferer, supposing it is a man who's hurt. But if it's an animal, the human witness must be an onlooker. Anyhow it must be clear that no witness, no cruelty. Cruelty lies in the heart of the beholder just as beauty is said to lie only in his eyes.⁵

Objectively, the fact of cruelty is ordinarily established by the emotion of antagonism to the thing that causes the pain. Cruelty cannot, therefore, be objectively defined. Whatever you feel to be cruel *is* cruel. All we can say is that certain things are perceived as cruel by many persons and for such persons the emotional reaction is real enough. We ought to be careful not to inflict this upon them. But what is not felt to be cruel among the coterie that observes it or knows about it, is not cruel for those who do not observe it or know about it.

The antivivisectionists' hearts are wrung by sight or knowledge of pain suffered by a dog or other animal subjected to surgical or other injury. Knowing what this does to their own hearts, they believe that it must be doing the same thing to the heart of the experimenter. Consequently it is injuring the experimenter's personality, is antisocial, and should be stopped.

The antivivisectionist's mistake is in putting so much confidence in analogies. He knows what pain he would feel if the operation in question were performed upon himself. He knows what sympathy he would feel if a personal friend suffered so. He knows what guilt he would feel, or ought to feel, if he were the one to inflict the injury. Therefore, he argues, the experimenter should feel a like degree of guilt. If he doesn't, it is because his heart has become hardened. If he is past redemption, too bad! But at least young scientists should be saved from this disaster.

But in truth the experimenter does not feel this guilt. What the antivivisectionist refuses to face is the fact of his great good fortune that the experimenter can work free of guilt and so continue to make discoveries that enlarge man's understanding of the world we live in, and which are regularly put to work increasing the well-being of everyone (including the antivivisectionist).

One last quotation: Under a sketch of dogs in an experimental laboratory—

"For pity's sake, stop!"

*"For humanity's sake, go on!"*⁶

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REFERENCES

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2. I Corinthians 13: 12.
3. Declaration of Independence.
4. Hemingway, E.: *Death in the Afternoon*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1932, page 113.
5. Wallace, Lew: *The Prince of India*, Book III, Chpt. 6, page 178 (Beauty is altogether in the eye of the beholder).
6. *Life*: About 1914 (when it was its old self—a magazine of humor, and a fighter against vivisection).